

University of Louisville

## ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository

---

Faculty Scholarship

---

2016

### Generational growing pains as resistance to feminine gendering of organization? An archival analysis of human resource management discourses

Kristen Lucas

*University of Louisville*, [kristen.lucas@louisville.edu](mailto:kristen.lucas@louisville.edu)

Suzy D'Enbeau

*Kent State University*

Erica P. Heiden

*College of Saint Mary*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/faculty>



Part of the [Business Administration, Management, and Operations Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), and the [Organizational Communication Commons](#)

---

#### Original Publication Information

Lucas, Kristen, Suzy D'Enbeau and Erica P. Heiden. "Generational Growing Pains as Resistance to Feminine Gendering of Organization? An Archival Analysis of Human Resource Management Discourses." *Journal of Management Inquiry* 25(3), pp. 322-337.

Copyright © 2016 The Authors. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1056492615616692>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact [thinkir@louisville.edu](mailto:thinkir@louisville.edu).

## Generational Growing Pains as Resistance to Feminine Gendering of Organization? An Archival Analysis of Human Resource Management Discourses

**Kristen Lucas**, University of Louisville

**Suzy D'Enbeau**, Kent State University

**Erica P. Heiden**, College of Saint Mary

### Abstract

Guided by a feminist communicology of organization framework, we examine generational growing pains by analyzing discourses appearing in *HR Magazine* at three different points in time, which approximately mark the midpoint of Baby Boomers', Gen Xers', and Millennials' initial entry into the workplace. We reconstruct historically-situated gendered discourses that encapsulate key concerns expressed by human resource management professionals as they dealt with younger generations of workers: Personnel Man as Father Knows Best (1970), Human Resource Specialist as Loyalty Builder (1990), and Talent Manager as Nurturer (2010). We propose that frustrations expressed by older generations about Millennials may not be because Millennials are necessarily more demanding than their predecessors, but quite possibly because their expectations reflect and effect gendered changes of organizing.

**Keywords:** archival analysis, Baby Boomers, communication, discourse, feminist communicology of organization, Gen X, gendered organizations, generations, Millennials

Millennial generation workers (born between 1982-2000) are entering the workforce in droves. This generation is currently estimated to be 80 million strong, edging out Baby Boomers for the largest generation of U.S. employees. By the time the tail-end of this generation graduates from college and enters career-track jobs in the year 2022, it is estimated that between half and three-quarters of workers around the globe will be Millennial-aged (PwC, 2011; Schawbel, 2012). Like all generations before them, there is a cultural shift that comes with Millennials' entry into the workplace. In a two-way process of influence, new workers are influenced by their respective organizations as they learn the ropes and, in turn, their presence influences organizations. Surely this was the case for Generation X (born 1963-1981), Baby Boomers (born 1943-1962), and even the Veterans (born 1925-1942), as each age-based generation of workers possesses distinct life experiences, job expectations, work ethics, attitudes, and motivators (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010; Pritchard & Whiting, 2014; Strauss & Howe, 1991).

But far from embracing changes brought about by Millennials, older organizational incumbents increasingly complain about "kids these days." Popular culture commentary highlights Baby Boomer and Gen X concern that Millennials (alternatively known as Gen Y, Generation Me, Generation Next) are even more challenging than previous generations had been when they entered the workforce (Goodman, 2012; Jimenez, 2012). Although some strengths of this generation have been noted (e.g., they work well in teams; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), they also have been described as entitled, over-confident, narcissistic, and hypersensitive, which can cause serious problems for organizations trying to socialize them (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Reynolds, 2005; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). Further, differences in generational cohorts can contribute to communication difficulties, conflict, and decreased levels of organizational commitment in the workplace (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

In this article, we propose that these concerns might be more than simple growing pains of a transition to a younger generation and the corresponding adjustment in expectations. Rather, our analysis articulates how the introduction of

Millennials into the workplace may be signaling fundamental changes to the traditional, masculine gendering of organizations. To unpack this argument, we examine how generations, gender, and communication are discursively constructed in *HR Magazine* issues at three different points in time. In doing so, we answer recent calls to examine how intergenerational interactions and relationships develop within organizations (Joshi et al., 2010), how gender intersects with generation (McCann, Kellermann, Giles, Gallois, & Viladot, 2004), and how the work of human resource management (HRM) is constituted by communication (Fyke & Buzzanell, 2014).

In the following sections, we situate our study by outlining our guiding theoretical framework: feminist communicology of organization. Then, we discuss ways organizations traditionally have been gendered as masculine. Next, we describe the generational attributes and characteristics of current employee generations in the workplace, specifically focusing on some of the perceived problematic characteristics of the Millennial generation. Our theoretical review culminates in the research questions that guide this study.

### Feminist Communicology of Organization

Our study is guided by Ashcraft and Mumby's (2004) feminist communicology of organization, a theoretical framework grounded in critical organization studies. Of central importance to this framework is the simultaneous positioning of communication as the essential process of organizing and the belief that gender is constitutive of organization "regardless of whether such activity appears to be about gender" (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p. xv). Moreover, gender never works alone, in that it intersects with other discourses of difference to (re)constitute power relations and shape identities.

Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) identify four overlapping frames through which to view the complex relationships between discourse, gender, and organization. Our approach most closely mirrors the frame *discourse (en)genders organization*. Here, attention is paid not to specific organizational sites, but instead to "parallel discursive arenas that interlace gender and labor" (p. 18), such as texts drawn from scholarship, popular culture, and academic and popular management literature. These public discourses are viewed as narrative threads or fragments that, together, compose broader societal discourses. More than simply reflecting a particular reality, these discourses possess the power to shape organizations, to direct the formation of gendered identities, and to influence how individuals participate in everyday organizational life.

Notably, there is a strong historical imperative embedded within feminist communicology of organization. Discourses, by their very nature, are both a product and producer of larger historical contexts. However, as Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) point out, historical contexts "tend to fade from collective memory as discourse takes root in social consciousness" (p. 121). Therefore, by explicitly tracing historical context, feminist communicology of organization sheds light on ruptures and contradictions of organizational change and the role particular agents have in producing institutional discourses—whether those agents are individuals, groups, organizations, etc. It is in this spirit that we employ feminist communicology of organization to explore gendered shifts in thinking about and performances of organizational life over time. In the next section, we consider how work and organizations are gendered.

### The Gendering of Work and Organization

Organizations—not just their organizational members—are gendered (Acker, 1990; Alvesson & Billing, 2009). Alvesson and Billing (2009) differentiate between understanding gender *in* organizations and organizations *as* gendered. The former is concerned with what happens to men and women in organizations; whereas, the latter views organizations in terms of masculine and feminine values and meanings (see also Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Practices such as the gender segregation of work, the ubiquity of discourses that affirm gender differences, the implicit acceptance of men's behaviors and perspectives as "natural," and the resultant organizing logics and control mechanisms construct organizations as inherently male (Acker, 1990, 2006). This gendering has implications for the scope of HRM. For example, hierarchies and organizational structures, such as glass ceilings (Pichler, Simpson, & Stroh, 2008), concrete walls (Bell & Nkomo, 2001), and sticky floors (Booth, Francesconi, & Frank, 2003) impede women's upward advancement. And informal communication networks, akin to "good old boy networks," tend to advantage male members in career development (Gregory, 2009; McDonald, 2011; Oakley, 2000).

Gender also is evident in organizational values, preferred leadership styles, and idealized career forms. As Morgan (2007) stated, "the links between the male stereotype and the values that dominate many ideas about the nature of organization are striking. Organizations are often encouraged to be rational, analytical, strategic, decision oriented, tough and aggressive, and so are men" (p. 186; see also Kanter, 1977). This masculine ethic translates to organizational processes that value objectivity, competition, rationality, and decisiveness (Buzzanell, 1994; Maier, 1999; Morgan, 2007), and that are regulated by masculine standards of expression, self-promotion, and humor (Hearn, 1993; Kerfoot & Knights, 1996; Murphy & Zorn, 1996; Pichler et al., 2008). In this context, traditionally feminine traits such as empathy, concern for others, intuition, caring, holistic thinking, and cooperation are less valued (Alvesson & Billing, 2009; Buzzanell, 1994; Calás & Smircich, 2006).

Even ideal career forms are gendered masculine (Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006). For example, various types of promotion criteria are all related to stereotypical masculine career patterns: structurally, the typical career pattern is linear, progressive, and assumes managers are male; culturally, career success frequently involves the sacrifices of the (often female) spouse's career; and organizationally, success entails the image of masculine managers who possess technical skills, formal leadership experience, and administrative ability (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009). Likewise, professional commitment, which is associated with long hours, is held up by the ideal (masculine) worker who has unlimited time to spend at work (Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002). These gendered expectations often mean that professional women are expected to perform according to a masculine career model (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005) and professional men are rarely found working flexible work hours (Sheridan, 2004).

Billing and Alvesson (2000) maintained that the gendering of organizations is an historical phenomenon that is embedded in a particular moment in time, and, therefore, subject to change as dominant ways of thinking about gender change. Accordingly, ideal worker expectations for both women and men also are malleable (see Pichler et al., 2008; Runté & Mills, 2006). Further, the work of HRM is inherently tied to people's prevailing attitudes about workers and work (Gordon & Miller, 2014). Taken together, this research provides a starting point for looking at how generational differences might help to explain a (re)gendering of organizations.

### Generations in the Workplace

Generational theory is based on the belief that historical experiences, economic and social conditions, and other societal changes influence each person as they mature into adults to create a unique set of shared beliefs, attitudes, and values for those individuals who were born within the same historic time period (Giancolo, 2006; Kupperschmidt, 2000). As such, generations often are identified by specific spans of birth years. Generational theory challenges the more traditional belief that people change, mature, and develop their values, attitudes, and preferences as a function of age. Rather, generational cohorts share historical and socialization experiences, including "shifts in society-wide attitudes; changes in social, economic, and public policy; and major events" (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 66), that affect how generational members interact with the world over the course of their lives (Smola & Sutton, 2002). While generational differences do not represent innate characteristics of individual group members, at the aggregated level, there are commonalities that influence such things as attitudes, outlook, expectations, and so forth.<sup>1</sup>

Generation can play a significant role in impacting career- and work-related values, experiences, and expectations (Joshi et al., 2010; Smola & Sutton, 2002). In specific, research on generational differences suggests that the characteristics and work-related values of each age-based generation are different from one another, including differences in work ethic (Meriac, Woehr, & Banister, 2010), motivation (Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008), work attitudes (Twenge, 2010; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010), work values (Chen & Choi, 2008; Westerman & Yamamura, 2007), work-life balance expectations (Favero & Heath, 2012), leadership behaviors (Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown, 2007), and desire for workplace "fun" (Lamm & Meeks, 2009).

For example, Baby Boomers have been characterized as achievement-driven workaholics who prioritize work over family (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Gursoy, Maier, & Chi, 2008; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Twenge, 2010). Baby Boomers' strong work ethic, high work centrality, and commitment to the workplace exemplify Acker's (1990) delineation of the ideal male worker, giving this generation predominantly masculine traits. Gen Xers are strongly individualistic and competitive, technically competent, comfortable with diversity, and feel they can find a balance between work and recreation (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Patterson, 2007; Zemke et al., 2000). Overall, Gen Xers understand that the lifetime employment contract is gone and maximize their lifetime employability instead (see Buzzanell, 2000). However, even absent the loyalty of their Baby Boomer predecessors, Gen Xers still adhere to the basic underlying principles of hierarchy, masculine work values, and masculine organizing.

Of particular concern to this study is the newest generation to join the workforce, Millennials. According to C. A. Martin (2005), Millennials "thrive on challenging work and creative expression, love freedom and flexibility, and hate micromanagement" (p. 39). Millennials need clear directions and constant support; however, they simultaneously crave flexibility to work at their own pace and in their own ways. In particular, Millennials are criticized for their desire for frequent feedback, continuous recognition, open communication, opportunities for collaboration, and close relationships with their managers (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Gursoy et al., 2008; C. A. Martin, 2005; SHRM Research Quarterly, 2009). Problematically, these desires translate to their being perceived by older generations as high-maintenance, demanding, and spoiled. A review of the popular press literature suggests that Millennials expect a lot from their employers, including not only good pay and benefits, rapid advancement, and work-life balance, but also interesting work that makes a contribution to society (Alsop, 2008). They are viewed as having little respect for authoritative structures within organizations (McCann & Giles, 2006) and possess ambivalent attitudes toward traditional notions of a "real job" (O'Connor & Raile, 2015).

Given these perceptions, it is no wonder that managers and HRM specialists are concerned about the influx of Millennials into workplaces. But to what extent are current workplace frustrations with regard to Millennials simply normal organizational growing pains? Towards this end, we seek to better understand how the entry of different generations of young people into organizations has been experienced within gendered and communicative contexts of the time. Thus this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the prevailing generational concerns expressed by HRM professionals about Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials upon their entry into the workforce?

RQ2: How do discourses of generation, gender, and communication intersect, and how are these discourses reflected in the perceived roles and responsibilities of HRM?

### Archival Analysis and Synthesis

To examine discourses of generations, gender, and communication across multiple time periods, we turned to *HR Magazine*, the official publication of the Society for Human Resource Management (present circulation 250,000+). In its early years, the magazine was published as *The Personnel Administrator* (1956-1989) by what was then known as the American Society for Personnel Administration (ASPA). Given the publication's wide circulation and its position as an authority on human resource issues, *HR Magazine* provides a reasonably consistent and contemporaneous view of key employment concerns, the scope of HRM, and the role of the HRM employee. We focused on three time periods approximated with different generations' entry into the workforce: Baby Boomers in 1970 (then 6-27 years old), Gen Xers in 1990 (then 9-29 years old), and Millennials in 2010 (then 10-28 years old). These years represent points in time in which the incoming generation's initial entry into full-time work was approaching the midpoint. Accordingly, organizations would have witnessed some effects of their influx and would be anticipating further effects as the rest of the generation entered the workplace.

Balancing our needs for depth of analysis and breadth of coverage, we examined three issues from each target year, one from the beginning, midpoint, and end of the year (January, July, and December). We made copies of the entirety of each of the nine issues, including covers and all advertisements and indexes. In total, our analysis covered 772 pages of text and images. We then independently engaged in a close reading of every element of the issue, including article content, advertisements, illustrations, photos, bylines, word choices, etc. We attended specifically to narrative threads that reflected our particular phenomenon of interest (generation) and the primary concerns of feminist communicology of organization (gender and communication). By narrative threads, we refer to fragments or representations of phenomena embedded within social texts (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). In our initial data immersion and analysis phase, we recorded specific details of each occurrence of gender, generation, or communication and wrote analytic memos that captured our dominant impressions (Tracy, 2013). Our notes and memos totaled 70 single-spaced pages.

A key commitment in our archival analysis was to privilege discourses and language (pertaining to our research questions) as they appeared in the texts. By doing so, we were able to reveal important discursive shifts. For instance, in 1970, HRM professionals had titles such as "employee relations man," "personnel manager," and "director of labor relations." But collectively they were referred to as "personnel men," such as when a columnist in the January/February 1970 issue said, "It's what we *personnel men* call a common complaint" (p. 32). In 1990, HRM professionals had titles such as "benefits and compensation manager," "training and development manager," and "HR planning manager." With the focus on specialized job roles and computerized tools to perform tasks with speed and precision (from applicant screening to benefits communication and more), their role shifted from broad-based personnel generalists to "HR specialists." Finally, in 2010, HRM professionals still had titles such as "HR director," but new titles such as "chief talent and strategy officer" and "talent acquisition manager" were beginning to appear. More importantly, multiple references to identifying, recruiting, retaining, and investing in "talent" reflected a new self-described role of HRM as "talent management."

In our data synthesis phase, we iteratively cycled through processes of reexamining our data, contextualizing them within historical frameworks and theoretical grounding, and refining our understandings (Tracy, 2013). We shared our analysis notes and analytic memos and worked through observations in a sharing and comparing process. We looked for similarities, such as themes that appeared in multiple issues from the same year. In these instances, we confirmed that it was a salient theme. We also looked for differences, such as observations that appeared in only a single issue. For these instances, we either found additional evidence from other issues to support the theme or dropped the observation as an aberration.

To historically situate our analysis, we turned to human resource-centered historical accounts of the immediately preceding decades to identify key issues and concerns that build up to the year of focus (SHRM, 2008). Finally, we synthesized the narrative threads from across the three issues of each year into a reconstructed, historically-situated discourse (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004) that described the confluence of generations, gender, and communication for each period and detailed the changing role of the HRM professional in response to the entry of new generations of young workers.



## HRM Discourses of Generation, Gender, and Communication

Each year of *HR Magazine* presented a narrative about the role of the HRM professional, his or her relationship to employees, and the larger cultural context. These include: (a) 1970's Personnel Man as Father Knows Best, (b) 1990's Human Resource Specialist as Loyalty Builder, and (c) 2010's Talent Manager as Nurturer. See Table 1 for a summary of key characteristics.

**Table 1**

*Key Characteristics of Generation-Based HRM Discourses*

	1970	1990	2010
<b>Human Resource Role</b>	Personnel Man	HR Specialist	Talent Manager
<b>Employees</b>	Men	Employees	Talent
<b>Newcomer Generation</b>	Baby Boomers	Gen Xers	Millennials
<b>Generational Concerns</b>	Anti-establishment Individualistic	Disloyal Self-serving	Entitled Special High-maintenance
<b>Gender</b>	Boys club Unproblematically masculine	Politically-correct Accommodating women's needs	Outwardly gender-neutral Feminine
<b>Communication</b>	Negotiate Socialize Educate	Persuade Build loyalty	Recognize Value Collaborate

### 1970: Personnel Man as Father Knows Best

The 1960s were a turbulent decade that was “remembered for radicalism, both politically and socially” (SHRM, 2008, p. 27). Within this decade, there were several social movements gaining momentum, including those for civil rights, women's rights, and anti-Vietnam War efforts. Throughout the decade, legislation was passed for the Equal Pay Act (1963), Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act (1964), Affirmative Action (1965; amended in 1967 to cover gender discrimination), and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (1967). Yet, throughout all this turbulence, the ASPA, and presumably *Personnel Administrator*, “reflected none of that turbulence” (SHRM, 2008, p. 28). From a gender standpoint, by the end of the decade, about 40 percent of U.S. women worked outside the home (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Even though they had a growing presence in the workplace, they were “subjected to insults, sexual jokes and aggression, and invisibility except as sexual objects” (SHRM, 2008, p. 36) and their participation in the workforce was suspected to be linked to negative impacts on “family life, mental health, juvenile delinquency and on society as a whole” (SHRM, 2008, p. 31).

Thus, in 1970, the world of HRM, then called personnel administration, was a man's world with men holding essentially all full-time HRM positions. “Girls” figured into the mix in the form of temporary and support positions. In this gendered context, paternalistic communication was strategically employed to persuade the (potentially unruly) incoming generation to embrace organizational life and to reinforce masculinity as the preferred and unquestioned organizational form. In this section, we share the story of 1970's personnel man as father knows best.

In 1970, editorial and advertising content alike referred to personnel experts as men: “salesmen,” “foremanship,” “every day men,” “spokesmen,” “manpower training,” “key man,” “business man,” “top-notch man for the job,” “employee relations man,” “new men,” and the ubiquitous “personnel men.” Although male generic language was the norm at the time (i.e., using male pronouns to refer to men and women), numerous examples indicated that men dominated all aspects of personnel administration. For example, all of the articles in 1970 contained photos and short bios of the authors, who were male personnel administrators or academics with a specialization in personnel issues. In fact, not a single article from these three issues was penned by a woman.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, magazine content and advertisements told the story of the personnel man. The Dow Leadership series featured only men (November/December 1970, p. 2), and the names in the masthead for the 1970s issues were predominantly male (51 out of 53)—with the exception of the association secretary and one local chapter president. Despite the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission deeming sex-segregated want ads illegal in 1968 (SHRM, 2008), advertisements still called specifically for men (e.g., “Many openings for *men* able to take chge [sic] of personnel function at plant level”; January/February 1970, p. 13; “Openings in many locations for degreed *men* with 2 or more years experience” November/December 1970, p. 22).

Women were largely absent from the pages of the 1970s issues, which likely reflected their absence from the HRM function and, to an extent, their absence from professional positions in the workplace. In contrast to permanent, professional,

career-track personnel men, women were “girls” who filled temporary or support positions—whether it was The American Girl Division of AGS Services asking to “Flag us for your vacation crew—whether it’s one girl or fifty” (July/August 1970, p. 2), Kelly Girl assuring that a “Never-Never Girl” from Kelly “Never fails to please” (November/December 1970, back cover), or the U.S. Postal Service advising managers to “Tell your girl to fill it out [the attached form] and mail it in” (November/December 1970, p. 25). Noticeably, articles speculated as to why women were not in HRM positions. In one seemingly progressive article, “Women in Management—If Not, Why Not?,” the authors cited a litany of barriers for women’s advancement, including widely-held perceptions that women were not well suited for careers in business because they would get married and quit their jobs, follow their husbands’ career paths, find working conditions undesirable, be unable to handle business travel, and be unable to succeed in positions that require a “forceful personality” (November/December 1970, p. 6). In brief, the world of personnel administration was for men only.

Given the prominence of men in the HRM function, it is not surprising that the approach to communication was highly masculine. Communication was positioned as a tool to achieve desired outcomes for the wise and competitive personnel man, who reinforced his position as a father-figure who knew what was best for the organization and its employees. Throughout all interactions, he was positioned as being rightfully and calmly in control. One expert explained, “The final control must, of course, remain with the manager but if he expects to prevent misunderstanding and dissatisfaction he must assume the obligation to acquaint his people with the procedure” (July/August 1970, p. 10).

The personnel man’s communication approach varied from understanding to tough, depending upon the context and his goal. He relied on skills such as explaining details, clarifying questions, justifying decisions, selling, negotiating, and persuading to achieve such ends as quelling employee dissatisfaction regarding performance evaluations to negotiating contracts with the union. In describing the importance of communication skills for executives, advice included asking a paternalistic probe to ensure that the all-knowing “father’s” position was understood:

One must consistently accept the burden of responsibility to make himself understood by identifying with his audience and asking himself ‘How will he, she, or they best understand;’ define one’s subject matter and key terms; use simple terms whenever possible; let your audience respond; ask at appropriate points ‘*Am I making myself clear?*’ (July/August 1970, p. 26).

Even in advice that verged on a more dialogic and feminine approach to communication, the personnel man remained in control:

First listen. When the employee has finished telling you about that with which he is upset, say, “What you have mentioned concerns me also. What are your ideas on how to correct this situation?” Or, when an employee says, I hate to sound like I’m griping...” Your answer may well be, “You don’t sound like you’re griping, you sound concerned, and it appears you should be.” (January/February 1970, p. 33)

The author conceded that there is some inauthenticity to this approach saying, “A gimmick approach? Maybe it is. It just happens to work.” Importantly, this approach framed the paternalistic and patronizing, father-knows-best personnel man as an attentive father who was concerned with employees’ issues.

This paternalistic tone was most pronounced when dealing with Baby Boomers, who were early-career organizational newcomers in 1970. In fact, problems with the “new breed” of young workers were likened to bad parenting. A former president of ASPA lamented, “we now are witnessing certain frustrations of freedom within organizations not unlike the frustrations of extreme permissiveness in child-raising” (November/December 1970, p. 28).

Articles referenced a need to rein in the younger, anti-establishment Baby Boomer<sup>3</sup> generation: “The young college student today conceives of himself as an individual, who has to make sure that the establishment—the rutted, entrenched organization—doesn’t suppress him or his generation of colleagues” (July/August 1970, p. 27). The incoming generation also was described as “critical of authority” and “distrustful of adult thinking” (July/August 1970, p. 34), and as possessing “contempt for Establishment” (January/February 1970, p. 2). Other students, although perhaps a minority, were described as “hippie[s],” “radicals,” and “most condemning of the older generation” (July/August 1970, pp. 27-28). Viewed in this manner, the relationship between the personnel man and the young employee was potentially wrought with antagonism. Consequently, the personnel man took a fatherly position as being responsible for properly socializing the young (male) employee to the organization, its rules, and its virtues.

The proper grooming of Baby Boomers included anticipatory socialization of college students prior to their arrival in the workplace. In a speech delivered at the ASPA national convention (and reprinted in its entirety), the speaker assumed the position of the wise and all-knowing father who advocated for a stronger adult role in directing young adults. Railing on recent anti-Vietnam War protests at Columbia University, the speaker called for members of the older generation—the governor, university leaders, and parents—to rein in the younger generation:

When we take that kind of stance [i.e., halting campus protests and “getting on with education”], the majority of our young people are smart enough to recognize the wisdom in it and we will see them support it. Because they want responsible leadership; and if we’re going to be successful in any walk of life we have to demonstrate some kind of leadership. (July/August 1970, p. 36).

The speaker further elaborated on successful and unsuccessful approaches to enforcing rules among young people. Specifically, his comments demonstrated that the younger generation needed to be guided by a strong and wise father-figure who can persuasively present his knowledge:

We had a man run the dormitory once for a short period of time. He said, "I don't agree with the Dean's rules, but I have to enforce them." ... You don't influence anybody possibly by saying that you don't agree with the rules.... I like to have people around me who say, "You know, these rules may not be understood by you but they are for the best. And let me help you understand them because I agree with them." (July/August 1970, p. 39)

In addition to properly socializing the younger generation, the personnel man also was responsible for attracting the younger generation to industry positions. Authors were quick to notice that the younger generation was a force to be reckoned with—40 to 50 percent of the 1970 workforce was under 30 years old (November/December 1970, p. 44), half of all union membership was under 30 years old (January/February 1970, p. 4), and every year, "several hundred thousand college graduates will be leaving the ivory halls in the quest for career opportunities" (July/August 1970, p. 34). So another focus of managing the younger generation was to meet their demands. One of the primary changes witnessed in the younger generation was higher educational attainment, which was linked to a shift in work values brought about by the "population change." Some of these changes included values like "an unprecedented sense of mobility and freedom" and a need to "assert their own individuality" (July/August 1970, pp. 32, 34); a strong desire for involvement, participation, and autonomy (November/December 1970, p. 44); and a drive to have the chance to become what they have the "capacity and desire to become" (January/February 1970, p. 43).

One contributor asked, "What should we do to attract young, aggressive men to our individual companies as future managers?" (January/February 1970, p. 42). He posed the answer, "We must place the desired image in the most favorable setting and clothe the new image in the already accepted values of the people we are trying to react [sic]" (January/February 1970, p. 44). An expert in college relations added:

The student is convinced that those of us who are older are overly conservative in management, and in our understanding of our approach to social problems. He believes that our interest in him is little more than that of a cipher among an array of ciphers. So, it becomes necessary for us as employers to *find ways to convince him* that organizational management is essential to the functioning of modern day industry, and that it is not contrary to his interests. (July/August 1970, p. 27, emphasis added)

Personnel men also recognized the younger generation's expectation for a candid communication style: "The better educated population of today is demanding accountability of its leaders, whether within the labor or the political party.... The best solution is a reasoned, factual, free from sham negotiation with straightforward communication" (January/February 1970, p. 26).

Taken together, the overarching narrative of 1970 was of the personnel man as father knows best. The HRM function was firmly entrenched in a boys club, largely devoid of women. Capable personnel men used their paternalistic communication skills to persuade the incoming generation of the virtues of the organization and either disabuse them of notions of individuality and/or appease those desires. But personnel men also were persuasive in that they were selling the younger generation on the desirability of careers in industry (and specific organizations). There was some pushback from the younger generation that was distrustful of patent manipulation and pressed for more straightforward communication from senior human resource professionals as it pertained to their careers. In brief, the 1970's personnel man took on the role of the father in convincing the incoming generation that they should embrace the masculine organizational structural of the businessman's world.

### 1990: Human Resource Specialist as Loyalty Builder

In the decade leading up to 1990, the economy had rebounded from a deep recession to a period of relative prosperity. The median U.S. household income rose more than 50% between 1981 and 1989 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), due in part to the rise of women in the workplace. Nearly 60 percent of all U.S. women worked outside the home, marking a 35% increase in their labor force participation rate since 1970 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). The 1980s also marked a decade of firsts for women breaking into boys' clubs: Sandra Day O'Connor was appointed as a U.S. Supreme Court justice (1981), Sally Ride became the first woman astronaut aboard a space mission (1983), Geraldine Ferraro was named as the Vice Presidential nominee of the Democratic Party (1984), women around the country were finally admitted as members of Rotary Clubs (1987), and ASPA named its first female Chair (1985). In another notable change for the HR profession, ASPA changed its name to the Society for Human Resource Management in September 1989, dropping the dated "personnel administration" in favor of "human resource management," a phrase first introduced in 1970. Following suit, *Personnel Administrator* was renamed *HR Magazine* in January 1990.

The strong economy (despite a short-lived recession in 1990) shifted the function of HRM towards an emphasis on employee loyalty or lack thereof. In contrast to previous decades when employees relied upon—and then were betrayed by—lifetime employment contracts, by 1990, they took a more self-interested stance



by focusing on building capacities for lifetime employability (see Heriot & Pemberton, 1995). In this context, employees were more geographically mobile and were far less likely to stay with a single company over their lifespan as previous generations had done. Thus, a primary concern of HRM was recruiting and retaining quality employees through innovative, loyalty-building programs (e.g., work-life balance initiatives, awards programs). Here, we reconstruct the discourse of 1990's human resource specialist as loyalty builder.

To begin, magazine issues described the workplace as no longer an employers-market, and a primary goal of HRM communication was to instill worker loyalty. Wanda Lee, Chairman of SHRM, explained the primary communication challenge of 1990:

Of course, in today's world employees can go someplace else; there isn't the loyalty to employers that there used to be. Instead there is loyalty to one's profession and to one's self. Employers have to learn how to respond to that changing mindset, that changing value system. (January 1990, p. 44)

Employee benefits and recognition were offered as techniques to retain employees. As summed up in a feature article, "The point of benefits is employee relations—to reach out to the employee and say, 'we offer benefits because we care about you'.... If you've got a benefit plan efficiently administered, without glitches, then you've got content people" (January 1990, p. 29). From the January 1990 issue alone, there was mention of deferred bonus plans that gave cash bonuses after several years of loyalty (p. 16), profit-sharing and gain-sharing plans (pp. 36-38), and even home ownership incentives (p. 15). There were advertisements for employee reward companies that provided various kinds of gifts to entice employee loyalty, such as gift checks (p. 73), watches (p. 17), and clocks (p. 43). Articles throughout the 1990 issues focused on how to cultivate loyalty from three key constituents: women, Baby Boomers, and the incoming generation, Gen Xers.

By 1990, women had secured an undeniable presence in HRM positions. In fact, 51% of all SHRM members were women (SHRM, 2008). Additionally, women held a range of leadership positions in SHRM and wrote about one third of the feature articles in *Personnel Administrator*. Women's presence in organizations was acknowledged by more politically-correct and inclusive language. Overall, the 1990 issues demonstrated concerted efforts at gender-parity. The blatantly sexist ads were gone, replaced with gender-balanced ads. Editorial content substituted male generic language with gender-neutral language ("they," "you," "he or she"). And references to "personnel men" disappeared. In their place were a range of new titles, reflecting the HRM tasks of the day: managers, supervisors, analysts, specialists, directors, administrators, and consultants. Recruiters no longer asked for men in their ads, but instead searched for "individuals," "professionals," and "generalists" with experience (July 1990, p. 100).

The most prominent way in which women's presence was accommodated was with work-life balance programs. Flexible work options were introduced with some skepticism (January 1990, pp. 75-78). But the crux of work-life balance focused on child care.<sup>4</sup> Editorial and advertising content alike connected child care centers to increasing employee loyalty and building better work-life balance for female employees. For instance, the major profile in the December issue was on Walter Trosin, VP of HR at Merck, and his implementation of family-friendly policies:

The company has placed a lot of emphasis on work and family issues and has implemented several leading-edge programs. For example, the company provides 18 months of parental leave and according to Trosin, Merck has maintained flexible leave policies for parents for nearly 30 years. (December 1990, p. 57)

In fact, childcare was cited as one of the key criteria by which companies were awarded the "best companies for working mothers" by *Working Mother* magazine (December 1990, p. 22), and *HR Magazine* reported 16.5 percent of companies nationwide provided some sort of child-care programs (December 1990, p. 21).

Interestingly, work-life policies were characterized in gender-neutral terms, yet still favored masculine workplace values. Policies were "very easy to sell," "innovative and open to change," and "logical choices." In this way, policies were described in terms that resonated with masculine workplace values such as efficiency and rationality. Yet, there were indications that child care centers were not fully meeting needs of female employees, but instead were only meeting male standards. In a company profile, an HR executive was quoted as saying, "We were hearing from our *professional staff* that child care was adequately taken care of in the local area, yet we kept hearing from *women* that they were having trouble with child care" (July 1990, p. 61, emphasis added).

Additionally, training programs and benefits were created to retain female employees. For example, articles and ads described organizational training and policies with regard to rape in a "women's safety program" (July 1990, p. 61); stopping and preventing sexual harassment (December 1990, p. 12); and gender inequity and corresponding strategies for compliance (December 1990, pp. 65-66). These new foci of HRM policies were designed to address full-time female employees and to encourage them to stay with the organization.

The HRM specialist also had to cultivate the loyalty of different generations of workers. For the mid-career Baby Boom generation, the cohort effect of their stage of career development influenced attitudes and expectations. That is, Baby Boomers' growth potential was stalling and HRM specialists needed to find ways to motivate these workers toward

their greatest potential. One article cited Peter Drucker's *Wall Street Journal* commentary about the need to attend to Baby Boomers:

We will have to redesign managerial and professional jobs so that even able people will still be challenged by the job after five or more years in it.... And, above all, we will have to find rewards and recognition other than promotion—more money, bonuses, extra vacations and so on. In the meantime, however, an entire generation has grown up for whom promotion is the only real satisfaction, and failure to get one every year or two is equivalent to being a loser. (December 1990, p. 69)

As for Gen Xers, this youngest generation did not receive nearly as much attention as did their Baby Boomer predecessors. In fact, overall, *HR Magazine* did not explicitly address problems of an age-based generation of workers in as much as it referred to a larger cohort-based generation of workers within a particular time period (e.g., "Will your 1980's Corporate Awards Program Motivate your 1990's Employee?" January 1990, p. 84). One potential reason that generation was not as much of a focus in 1990 as it was in 1970 could be the smaller size of the generation of newcomers. Yet, even though there were fewer explicit references to young people, there still were several complaints about "kids these days." Complaints ranged from under-preparation to unrealistic expectations. In several places, articles lamented the state of the workforce. For instance, "Companies will be attempting to staff themselves from a labor pool with the lowest number of new workers since the Great Depression and with skill levels that have failed to keep up with technological advancement" (December 1990, p. 12). Another article on strategic directions for HRM claimed, "The changing demographics of the work force have created enormous educational needs and our educational systems are not producing what is needed" (December 1990, p. 39). And an author described how U.S. companies were revitalizing apprenticeship programs to overcome the skills crisis resulting from the "majority of young people who do not graduate from college... [and who consequently] receive the worst job preparation in the developed world, even though it is they who will make or break our economic future" (December 1990, p. 41).

It was not only lack of education that was a source of consternation for HR. In a feature story about turnover at Roy Rogers restaurants, generation was highlighted as a key factor: "The 20-28 age group has been coddled. They're used to more—expect more than we offer" (January 1990, p. 70). The author took to task management's claim that "workers today don't have what it takes," and instead argued that managers must learn how to work with the current workforce if they are to reduce employee turnover and build loyalty—including such tactics as creating a team feeling, training individuals for career advancement, and offering flexible schedules.

Regardless of gender or generation, a key approach to building loyalty and commitment was through improving communication with employees. For instance, several industry books delved into the topic. One called *Zapp! The Lightning of Empowerment* was "written as a modern-day fable in an effort to effectively communicate the abstract ideas of employee commitment and participation" to empower employees "with responsibility, a sense of ownership, and a sense of satisfaction" (January 1990, p. 8). However, this communicative approach to employee voice was guarded. For example, the cover article on working with HR consultants extolled the virtues of better communication with employees. The author said, "Employee input is becoming increasingly important. Employees do need to become part of the process, but you have to be careful about what you ask and how you ask it" (January 1990, p. 28). This advice came with a warning: "Ideally, employers should be able to link any changes to employee feedback received, but shouldn't open themselves up to criticism of the program, especially dealing with things that won't or can't be changed" (January 1990, p. 28). Thus communication was a tool to make employees *perceive* they have a voice, not necessarily for genuine dialogue.

In summary, the primary discourse of 1990 was of the HR specialist as loyalty builder. The broader cultural context of HRM was marked, most notably, by women's entrance into the boys club. Indeed, Gen Xers entered with relatively little notice. They were included in a larger cohort of "the 1990s employee"—someone who was disloyal, self-serving, and looking to advance his or her own career without regard to company loyalty. The strategic HR specialists used their communication skills to cultivate loyalty among all workers through a range of incentive programs, company initiatives, and encouragement of employee voice.

### 2010: Talent Manager as Nurturer

The first decade of the new millennium was one marked by corporate and economic upheaval, which rocked the workplace and dramatically heightened feelings of insecurity (SHRM, 2008). The internet boom of the 1990s was replaced with an internet bust period. This decade also witnessed the corporate scandals of Enron, Arthur Andersen, WorldCom, and Tyco, as well as the subprime lending debacle that sent the U.S. economy into its longest and deepest economic abyss since the Great Depression. It was also an emotionally devastating time, as chaos was wreaked by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. From an HR perspective, the profession was juggling the competing demands of aging Baby Boomers and the onslaught of Millennials, both vying for positions in a tight labor market. HR managers had to address these concerns against a backdrop of increasing globalization, skyrocketing

healthcare costs, technology demands, and domestic safety and security.

In contrast to the strong economic times of 1990 when companies were competing for employees, by 2010 the United States was in the midst of a recession. Yet, HR specialists had not gained an upper hand in what should have been an employers-market. Instead, managers seemed to be forced to deal with employees' demands. One potential reason for this counterintuitive response was the reframing of the HR-employee relationship. Rather than being viewed as "Joe workers" or "employees" as they had in the past, by 2010, workers were positioned as "talent." Accordingly, the role of HRM shifted to talent management. Below, we describe 2010's talent manager as nurturer.

By 2010, the employee had been reframed as talent. Even though jobs were still scarce, it appeared that talent was a rare and valuable resource that should be actively pursued by organizations. For instance, phrases such as "competition for talent intensified" (January 2010, p. 32), "be more competitive in the hunt for top talent" (December 2010, p. 39), "to help retain key talent" (December 2010, p. 40), and "reach the finite supply of homegrown talent" (January 2010, p. 21) were common. The frame was taken so far as to equate talent with specialness. An ad for the SHRM resume database touted that "Your next *star* is a few clicks away" (December 2010, p. 111) and an HR executive explained his organization's high turnover by saying, "Some of our *stars* couldn't see futures for themselves at the firm" (January 2010, p. 32).

When framed as talent, the connotation of HRM functions was to attend to talent's needs. These needs can be described broadly as highly-relational. Talent has a strong desire for dialogue and collaboration. They want frequent feedback and regular recognition. Their communicative needs are for genuine caring and positive affect of interpersonal exchanges. They also want greater attempts at and resources for balancing work-life needs across the lifespan. When combined, meeting these needs could be viewed as acts of nurturing.

First, in contrast to previous points in time when communication was used to socialize newcomers to the organization or to build loyalty among disloyal employees, in 2010 communication was much more dialogic and collaborative. In an article on exit interviews, instead of advice on how to communicate *to* employees, the focus was on communicating *with* them: "How can employees be motivated to tell the whole truth in exit interviews? Create a corporate culture around listening to employee suggestions, acting on ideas, being nonjudgmental, welcoming critiques, and solving problems identified by employees and former employees" (January 2010, p. 25). There also was a major push for collaboration, heralded as a desire of employees, a necessary skill for managers, and a way of improving results. Articles claimed that "Future management stars will be those who can boost the performance of their units and work *collaboratively* with others" (January 2010, p. 60); an ad for an HR Director looked for someone with a "*collaborative* working style" (January 2010, p. 67); organizational camaraderie should be fostered by promoting "openness, *collaboration*, friendship, and teamwork" (July 2010, special insert, p.7); and companies needed to "make way for employees to foster their own relationships and *collaborate* in their own learning" (December 2010, p. 74).

Second, recognition of above-average performers and feedback were other important aspects of managing talent. The author of an article on "Motivation in Today's Workplace" spoke at length about the need for recognition: "Employees need to have acknowledgement and respect and know that their contributions are valued" (July 2010, special insert, p. 4). Another article on innovative recognition described an organization's former recognition system as being slow and hierarchical. In contrast, the new and improved program, which yielded "smaller awards spread across a larger percentage of employees" was touted for being "inclusive" (January 2010, p. 26). As a result, "The percentage of employees recognized increased from 2 percent to 20 percent of the workforce," and a survey of award recipients showed them as "having more connection to the company, being more engaged in their work, and feeling more satisfied and appreciated as a result of receiving awards" (January 2010, p. 28).

Third, talent has a strong desire for positive affect. In a review of a book titled *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, the authors argued: "The fundamental task of leaders is to prime good feeling in those they lead, and that occurs when a leader creates resonance—a reservoir of positivity that frees the best in people. At its root, the primal job of leadership is emotional" (July 2010, special insert, p. 5). But a bigger focus of the affective influence of communication was on bad communication that led to negative emotion among talent. For instance, an article harshly critiqued a restaurant boss for an abusive email that "between obscenities," accused employees of being lazy and threatened to fire them for not working hard enough on a marketing initiative. The writer described the boss's bad behavior as bullying and described the message as "designed to be threatening and intimidating and was a clear abuse of power. In addition, it is horribly demeaning" (January 2010, p. 15). What is notable about this critique is that it was deemed newsworthy. Certainly, this was not the first time that employees were submitted to abusive communication by a boss. But in previous decades, this kind of incident did not make the cut for inclusion in *HR Magazine*. Its newsworthiness indicated that expectations of the workplace context had changed such that there was an expectation of more nurturing communication.

Finally, talent expected more benefits, specifically those regarding work-life balance and ways to shape work to meet

their needs. Accordingly, advertisements for on-site child centers were replaced by a range of work-life balance programs, flexible work arrangements, and alternative career models. For example, one article described:

Flexible work arrangements such as compressed workweeks, reduced work schedules and telecommuting; Sabbaticals that enable employees to pursue educational goals, work with nonprofits and community organizations, or explore other personal interests for four to 16 weeks; A program that enables individuals to leave PwC for longer periods, often for life-cycle events such as becoming a parent, while continuing to develop skills and network to facilitate re-entry. (January 2010, p. 34)

Importantly, these programs were defined in mostly gender-neutral terms and were designed to allow “employees to ‘dial up’ or ‘dial down’ workload, pace, and hours” (January 2010, p. 22). Programs were not about child care, but instead about lifestyle management. Workplace flexibility initiatives were described as important to all talent: “[It’s important] not to see it as just an issue for women or individuals with young children. It’s an issue that works its way through an individual’s life cycle” (July 2010, p. 73).

One compelling interpretation for the reframing of the HRM-employee relationship as talent management is in response to Millennials’ entrance into the workplace. That is, Millennials are noted as preferring communication styles and organizing practices that closely mirror the expectations and implications of a talent frame: valuing collaboration and freedom, having high demands for learning opportunities, frequent feedback, greater work/life balance, and stronger workplace relationships (July 2010, p. 40). Thus, many of these changes were attributed to Millennials.

In this new HRM context, Millennials were often chided for being high-maintenance, in part, because talent managers appeared to feel compelled to meet their demands: “Millennials *expect* to be accommodated by their employer” (July 2010, special insert, p. 8), “Younger retail workers are used to receiving information on cell phones or personal digital assistants. In fact, *they demand it*” (December 2010, p. 88), and “HR managers *have no choice* but to embrace the needs of Millennials who don’t want to work 9-5, who want to work collaboratively, expect work/life balance and who are loyal to their professions — not their companies” (December 2010, p. 71). One expert identified a range of unique Millennial characteristics, including being “savvy, confident, upbeat, open-minded, creative, and independent, but they can be challenging to manage” (July 2010, p. 40). The article explained that older workers begrudge the younger generation’s sense of entitlement and what they misinterpret as arrogance, warning, “Get ready for the generational clash at work as a generational firewall builds up frustration” (July 2010, p. 40).

There were several specific recommendations to enhance Millennials’ performance and communication, which included adapting workspaces and HRM models in Millennial-friendly ways. For example, a Danish company created an open workspace, “without walls or cubicles” where “couches invite engineers to kick back with their laptops and discuss a problem or new idea. Game rooms encourage energy release and bonding” (January 2010, p. 21). Moreover, a business consultant with expertise in managing generational diversity said, “The old HR model—recruit, train, supervise, and retain—should be shelved. Instead, companies should adopt a new model—initiate, engage, collaborate, and evolve” (July 2010, p. 41). In a profile of a company that followed this advice, one manager reported, “We had to strengthen our fundamental approach to retaining our people—by really understanding their goals and aspirations and providing the coaching, connectivity and experiences that would both develop and challenge them and improve the quality of our client service” (January 2010, p. 33). The new program “recognizes that every staff member has a personal constellation of interests that vary during the course of one’s career, and that a cookie-cutter approach to development no longer suffices” (January 2010, p. 33).

Collectively, by 2010, the role of HRM was reframed as talent managers as nurturer. In this context, the primary goal of communication was to nurture talent and cultivate a workplace context that privileges dialogue and collaboration, frequent feedback and recognition, positive workplace relationships, and work-life flexibility. Moreover, HRM professionals were expected to listen and talk to employees, not just when there were problems, and not just when it would benefit the organization, but also when the only benefit was to the employee. Notably, this nurturing approach to management of and communication with employees is highly feminine. Moreover, because the needs and expectations of “talent” mirror those of Millennials, it is this newest age-based generation that is reflecting and effecting a fundamental regendering of the traditional masculine organization. Below, we further explicate this conclusion.

### Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand prevailing concerns about the entry of different generations of young people into work, particularly as embedded in their respective gendered and communicative contexts. Our examination of discourses appearing in *HR Magazine* demonstrates that Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials all triggered unique generational growing pains, which led to an attendant (re)framing of the key roles, responsibilities, and challenges of HRM professionals in each time period. Additionally, our feminist communicology of organization approach reveals important insights at the intersection of generation, gender, and communication that suggest the frustrations expressed about Millennials also can be read as resistance to fundamental changes to the

traditional, masculine gendering of organizations. Below, we summarize our findings and explain the gendered tensions embedded in Millennial growing pains.

To recap, our analysis clearly demonstrates that Millennials are not the first generation of young people to prompt HRM challenges by expressing values and desires different from older generations. In 1970, Baby Boomers were viewed as anti-establishment and overly individualistic, leading HRM professionals to believe that young people needed to be reined in, educated, and properly socialized by tough-yet-benevolent father figures. In 1990, Gen Xers were positioned as part of the “1990s generation” that was labeled as disloyal and self-serving, spurring HRM professionals to reframe their primary function as loyalty building. In 2010, Millennials were perceived as “talent” who were entitled, special, and high-maintenance, thereby demanding that HRM personnel nurture them by attending to all their needs.

While each of these generations was troubling in its own way, we propose that there is something unique about Millennial-based growing pains that appears to be not as much about Millennials themselves as it is about organizing more broadly. Grounded by the position that organizations are constituted by communication and that communication and organizations are inherently gendered (Alvesson & Billing, 2009; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004), we argue that one interpretation is that Millennials’ expectations for work and workplace communication reflect and effect a regendering of the organization from masculine to increasingly feminine.

To explain this regendering, Millennials’ need for frequent and affirmative feedback, open communication, shared recognition, and close relationships with their managers means that communication is privileged for the sake of communication and its affect. In this way, communication is shifting from a solely masculine act of command-and-control to include more feminine acts of care that allow for individuals to provide each other with emotional support, create positive work relationships, facilitate community, and engage in genuine dialogue (Buzzanell, 1994; Groysberg & Slind, 2012; Pichler et al., 2008). Next, Millennials’ desire for collaboration and teamwork—in other terms, for relationships—has created a push for more communication on the job and has expanded organizing logics from competition to include also collaboration. Collaboration across levels of the organization flattens or makes irrelevant organizational hierarchy, creates opportunities for individuals to communicate outside of the traditional chains of command, and creates demand for more heterarchical and feminine organizational structures (Buzzanell, 1994; Maier, 1999). Finally, Millennials’ desire for work-life balance initiatives and ways of working—beyond simply accommodating childcare needs—are essentially calls for viable alternatives to linear, masculine career trajectories that have dominated the workforce for generations. Therefore, Millennials’ desire for alternative and nonlinear careers echoes a more feminine approach to careers (Buzzanell & Goldzwig, 1991; Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006).

Taken together, Millennials’ communicatively-based and inherently-gendered work expectations signal new preferences for organizing that stand in stark contrast to the masculine workplaces that Gen Xers and Baby Boomers entered decades earlier. When HRM personnel and other organizational members then adapt to meet Millennials’ demands—regardless of whether those demands are real or perceived—organizing itself undergoes a gendered transformation from masculine to increasingly feminine. Consequently, the frustration expressed about Millennials wanting frequent recognition, affirming feedback, open communication, collaboration, work-life balance, and so forth, alternatively can be read as frustration with organizations that are no longer *only* competitive, tough, hierarchically-organized, and all-encompassing. In this sense, complaints about Millennials’ entry into the workplace may be both expressions of generational growing pains and resistance to gendered changes.

It should be noted that Millennials are not solely responsible for these gendered changes. Certainly, Millennials are effecting *some* change by bringing their unique perspective and values to the workplace. But they also are reflecting other changes that are beyond their personal influence and are simply part of the environment which they are entering. This environment includes pre-existing changes that have been initiated by previous generations, such as the evolving social, cultural, political, and legal context in each time period (e.g., changes in the legal structure of equal opportunity, evolution in the thinking about diversity and inclusion). Millennials also have been socialized to value systems by their Baby Boomer and Generation X parents, so in this regard they are not only producers, but also products of changing expectations regarding the workplace. Even though Millennials are not the sole force behind the changes, they are a highly visible signal of the changes, and as such, they tend to be viewed as the source of frustration.

By uncovering important gendered tensions, which have been disguised in HRM discourses simply as generational growing pains, we make important contributions to theory and research on gendered organizations and generations in the workplace. First, our analysis contributes to the literature on gendered organizations by demonstrating the complex and nuanced ways in which organizations are gendered entities. Of particular note, our use of feminist communicology of organization allows us to illustrate the distinction between *gender in* organizations and *gendered* organizations within an applied realm (see Acker, 1990; Alvesson & Billing, 2009). Specifically, in earlier periods of time, HRM discourses were focused on gender in organization. In 1970, gender was viewed as a relative non-issue as there were few women in organizations, except for in secretarial roles; then in 1990, gender became more prominent, with its main concerns arising from the need to accommodate a critical mass



of women in the workforce (e.g., providing child care, using politically correct language). However, more recently HRM discourses adopted a far more nuanced *organizations as gendered* perspective. In 2010, the outwardly gender-neutral concerns expressed about Millennials hid deeper tensions about feminine organizing practices. Thus, our analysis demonstrates the relevance and applicability of a feminist communicology of organization lens for highlighting how deep gendered biases permeate organizing, yet remain relatively unnoticed and unchallenged (see also J. Martin, 2000).

Second, in a related vein, we make an important methodological contribution. While feminist communicology of organization is highly regarded as a theoretical perspective, there has been somewhat limited methodological guidance in providing practical strategies for using it as an analytic framework to conduct empirical studies. Our approach provides one possibility: defining a dataset; identifying through a close reading each narrative thread linked to communication, gender, and the phenomenon of interest; synthesizing those threads into a single storyline encapsulating the larger discourse, and then situating the discourse within its salient historical context. While techniques such as these are familiar within the domain of qualitative research, our overall approach provides a workable and systematic method for examining discourses from otherwise unwieldy datasets.

Third, we contribute to theory and research on generations in the workplace. Notably, because our analysis of *HR Magazine* was archival, we were able to distinguish between generational differences based upon a birth cohort's common worldview versus generational differences based upon age or life stage (see Cagin, 2011). Put simply, our analysis compares generational concerns articulated about three different generations of young adults *as they entered the full-time workforce*. Moreover, our analysis problematizes much extant research on generational differences by suggesting that frustrations directed at Millennials may be misattributed. Put another way, while Millennials are being described as "needy" and "special," the challenge may not be about young people per se, but instead about the evolution of organizations from masculine to increasingly feminine. Therefore, the negative attention being directed towards Millennials may be perpetuating harmful discourses and stereotypes that serve to undermine cross-generational relationships, mentoring and socialization of young people, and ongoing organizational efforts to manage and motivate a new generation of employees.

## Conclusion

By investigating how generations, gender, and communication intersect in HRM discourses at different points in time, we have offered an alternative interpretation of generational growing pains that underscores a profound gendered shift in organizing practices and preferences. That is, while it appears there have been growing pains with the entry of every new generation of young people, specific concerns raised by Millennials and the communicative responses enacted by HRM professionals reflect feminine organizing principles. Thus, frustrations expressed about Millennials may be obscuring deeper frustrations and anxieties about changes to traditional masculine organizing practices. Our analysis provides an opening for HRM practitioners and management scholars to shift the conversation away from problems with "kids these days," and toward more nuanced and productive dialogue about diversity in organizations.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, defining generations has been a topic of sociological debate for decades (e.g., Abrams, 1970; Alwin & McCammon, 2003; Kertzer, 1983). Furthermore, we acknowledge the limitations of a generational theory perspective, particularly for the purposes of a critically-oriented study. Demarcating generations by birth year ranges imposes rigid boundaries on a fluid phenomenon. Moreover, presenting clear characteristics of a generation conceals variety within generations and overlap between generations; risks essentializing and stereotyping in conjunction with group membership; and overlooks the socially-constructed nature of differences by presenting them as realist claims embedded in an objective reality. While we recognize the limitations of generational categorization, we accept that there are certain generational patterns that develop based on shared life experiences and, more specifically, that much management practice is based on acknowledgement of basic generational differences.

<sup>2</sup> The complete 1970 author index listed two articles in the March/April 1970 issue written by women. Not surprisingly, the topic of these articles was women's career issues.

<sup>3</sup> While the term "Baby Boomer" was not yet used, the generation was referred to with terms such as "young people," "students," "graduates," and "the new breed."

<sup>4</sup> Along with the entrance of women in the workplace came the appearance of children in the pages of *HR Magazine*, including photographs of children (January 1990, p. 88; July 1990, pp. 44, 61; December 1990, p. 34), children's drawings (January 1990, p. 23), and images of children's toys (July 1990, p. 13; December 1990, p. 21). These images marked an acknowledgement of employees' family life that was conspicuously absent in 1970.

## References

- Abrams, P. (1970). Rites de passage: The conflict of generations in industrial society. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 5, 175-190. doi:10.2307/259988
- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4, 139-158. doi:10.1177/089124390004002002
- Acker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender & Society*, 20, 441-464. doi:10.1177/0891243206289499
- Alsop, R. (2008). *The trophy kids grow up: How the Millennial generation is shaking up the workplace*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Alvesson, M., & Billing, Y. D. (2009). *Understanding gender and organizations* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Sage.
- Alwin, D., & McCammon, R. (2003). Generations, cohorts, and social change. In J. Mortimer & M. Shanahan (Eds.), *Handbook of the life course* (pp. 23-49). New York, NY: Kluwer/Plenum.
- Ashcraft, K. L., & Mumby, D. K. (2004). *Reworking gender: A feminist communicology of organization*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bell, E. L. J. E., & Nkomo, S. M. (2001). *Our separate ways: Black and white women and the struggle for professional identity*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Billing, Y. D., & Alvesson, M. (2000). Questioning the notion of feminine leadership: A critical perspective on the gender labelling of leadership. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 7, 144-157. doi:10.1111/1468-0432.00103
- Booth, A. L., Francesconi, M., & Frank, J. (2003). A sticky floors model of promotion, pay, and gender. *European Economic Review*, 47, 295-322. doi:10.1016/S0014-2921(01)00197-0
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2014). Table A-1. Employment status of the civilian population by sex and age. Washington, DC: United States Department of Labor.
- Buzzanell, P. M. (1994). Gaining a voice: Feminist organizational communication theorizing. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 7, 339-383. doi:10.1177/0893318994007004001
- Buzzanell, P. M. (2000). The promise and practice of the new career and social contract. In P. M. Buzzanell (Ed.), *Rethinking organizational and managerial communication from feminist perspectives* (pp. 209-235). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Buzzanell, P. M., & Goldzwig, S. R. (1991). Linear and nonlinear career models: Metaphors, paradigms, and ideologies. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 4, 466-505. doi:10.1177/0893318991004004004
- Buzzanell, P. M., & Lucas, K. (2006). Gendered stories of career: Unfolding discourses of time, space, and identity. In B. J. Dow & J. T. Wood (Eds.), *Sage handbook of gender and communication* (pp. 161-178). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Calás, M. B., & Smircich, L. (2006). From the 'woman's point of view' ten years later: Towards a feminist organization studies. In S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy, T. B. Lawrence & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organization studies* (2nd ed., pp. 284-387). London, UK: Sage.
- Chen, P.-J., & Choi, Y. (2008). Generational differences in work values: A study of hospitality management. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 20, 595-615. doi:10.1108/09596110810892182
- Cogin, J. (2011). Are generational differences in work values fact or fiction? Multi-country evidence and implications. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 23, 2268-2294. doi:10.1080/09585192.2011.610967
- Crumpacker, M., & Crumpacker, J. M. (2007). Succession planning and generational stereotypes: Should HR consider age-based values and attitudes a relevant factor or a passing fad? *Public Personnel Management*, 36, 349-369. doi:10.1177/009102600703600405
- Ely, R. J., & Meyerson, D. E. (2000). Theories of gender in organizations: A new approach to organizational analysis and change. In B. M. Staw & R. I. Sutton (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (Vol. 22, pp. 103-151). Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier.
- Favero, L. W., & Heath, R. G. (2012). Generational perspectives in the workplace: Interpreting the discourses that constitute women's struggle to balance work and life. *Journal of Business Communication*, 49, 332-356. doi:10.1177/0021943612456037
- Fyke, J. P., & Buzzanell, P. M. (2014). Meeting the communication challenges of training. In V. D. Miller & M. E. Gordon (Eds.), *Meeting the challenge of human resource management: A communication perspective* (pp. 97-108). New York, NY: Taylor Francis/Routledge.
- Giancolo, F. (2006). The generation gap: More myth than reality. *Human Resource Planning*, 29, 32-37.
- Goodman, M. (2012). Are we raising a generation of helpless kids? *Huffington Post* [Web log]. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/Mickey-goodman/are-we-raising-a-generati\\_b\\_1249706.html?ref=tw](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/Mickey-goodman/are-we-raising-a-generati_b_1249706.html?ref=tw)
- Gordon, M. E., & Miller, V. D. (2014). Communication and human resource management: Historic ties and new relationships. In V. D. Miller & M. E. Gordon (Eds.), *Meeting the challenge of human resource management: A communication perspective* (pp. 3-15). New York, NY: Taylor Francis/Routledge.
- Gregory, M. (2009). Inside the locker room: Male homosociability in the advertising industry. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 16, 323-347. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0432.2009.00447.x

- Groysberg, B., & Slind, M. (2012). *Talk, Inc: How trusted leaders use conversation to power their organizations*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing.
- Guillaume, C., & Pochic, S. (2009). What would you sacrifice? Access to top management and the work-life balance. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 16, 14-36. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0432.2007.00354.x
- Gursoy, D., Maier, T. A., & Chi, C. G. (2008). Generational differences: An examination of work values and generational gaps in the hospitality workforce. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 27, 448-458. doi:10.1016/j.ijhm.2007.11.002
- Hearn, J. (1993). Emotive subjects: Organizational men, organizational masculinities and the (de)construction of 'emotions'. In S. Fineman (Ed.), *Emotion in organizations* (pp. 142-166). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Heriot, P., & Pemberton, C. (1995). A new deal for middle managers. *People Management*, 1, 32-34.
- Jimenez, M. (2012). A Gen-Xer's rant: What's wrong with my millennial employees? *Inc.* [Weblog post]. Retrieved from <http://www.inc.com/mayra-jimenez/whats-wrong-with-millennial-employees.html>
- Joshi, A., Dencker, J. C., Franz, G., & Martocchio, J. J. (2010). Unpacking generational identities in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 35, 392-414. doi:10.5465/amr.2010.51141800
- Kanter, R. M. (1977). *Men and women of the corporation*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Kerfoot, D., & Knights, D. (1996). 'The best is yet to come?': The quest for embodiment in managerial work. In D. L. Collinson & J. Hearn (Eds.), *Men as managers, managers as men: Critical perspectives on men, masculinities and managements*. (pp. 78-98). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kertzer, D. I. (1983). Generation as a sociological problem. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 9, 125-149. doi:10.1146/annurev.so.09.080183.001013
- Kupperschmidt, B. (2000). Multigenerational employees: Strategies for effective management. *Health Care Manager*, 19, 65-76.
- Lamm, E., & Meeks, M. D. (2009). Workplace fun: The moderating effects of generational differences. *Employee Relations*, 31, 613-631. doi:10.1108/01425450910991767
- Lancaster, L. C., & Stillman, D. (2002). *When generations collide: Who they are, why they clash. How to solve the generational puzzle at work*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Maier, M. (1999). On the gendered substructure of organization: Dimensions and dilemmas of corporate masculinity. In G. N. Powell (Ed.), *Handbook of gender and work* (pp. 69-93). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Martin, C. A. (2005). From high maintenance to high productivity. *Industrial & Commercial Training*, 37, 39-44. doi:10.1108/00197850510699965
- Martin, J. (2000). Hidden gendered assumptions in mainstream organizational theory and research. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 9, 207-216. doi:10.1177/105649260092017
- McCann, R. M., & Giles, H. (2006). Communication with people of different ages in the workplace: Thai and American data. *Human Communication Research*, 32, 74-108. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2006.00004.x
- McCann, R. M., Kellermann, K., Giles, H., Gallois, C., & Viladot, M. A. (2004). Cultural and gender influences on age identification. *Communication Studies*, 55, 88-105. doi:10.1080/10510970409388607
- McDonald, S. (2011). What's in the "old boys" network? Accessing social capital in gendered and racialized networks. *Social Networks*, 33, 317-330. doi:10.1016/j.socnet.2011.10.002
- Meriac, J. P., Woehr, D. J., & Banister, C. (2010). Generational differences in work ethic: An examination of measurement equivalence across three cohorts. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 25, 315-324. doi:10.1007/s10869-010-9164-7
- Morgan, G. (2007). *Images of organization* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Murphy, B. O., & Zorn, T. E. (1996). Gendered interaction in professional relationships. In J. T. Wood (Ed.), *Gendered relationships* (pp. 213-232). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Myers, K. K., & Sadaghiani, K. (2010). Millennials in the workplace: A communication perspective on Millennials' organizational relationships and performance. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 25, 225-238. doi:10.1007/s10869-010-9172-7
- O'Connor, A., & Raile, A. N. W. (2015). Millennials' "get a 'real job'": Exploring generational shifts in the colloquialism's characteristics and meanings. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 29, 276-290. doi:10.1177/0893318915580153
- Oakley, J. G. (2000). Gender-based barriers to senior management positions: Understanding the scarcity of female CEOs. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 27, 321-334. doi:10.1023/a:1006226129868
- Patterson, C. K. (2007). Generational diversity: The impact of generational diversity in the workplace. *The Diversity Factor*, 15, 17-22.
- Pichler, S., Simpson, P. A., & Stroh, L. K. (2008). The glass ceiling in human resources: Exploring the link between women's representation in management and the practices of strategic human resource management and employee involvement. *Human Resource Management*, 47, 463-479. doi:10.1002/hrm.20227

- Pritchard, K., & Whiting, R. (2014). Baby boomers and the lost generation: On the discursive construction of generations at work. *Organization Studies*, 35, 1605-1626. doi:10.1177/0170840614550732
- PwC. (2011). Millennials at work: Reshaping the workplace. New York, NY: PricewaterhouseCoopers International Limited.
- Rapoport, R., Bailyn, L., Fletcher, J. K., & Pruitt, B. H. (Eds.). (2002). *Beyond work-family balance: Advancing gender equity and workplace performance*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Reynolds, L. A. (2005). Communicating total rewards to the generations. *Benefits Quarterly*, 21, 13-17.
- Runté, M., & Mills, A. J. (2006). Cold War, chilly climate: Exploring the roots of gendered discourse in organization and management theory. *Human Relations*, 59, 695-720. doi:10.1177/0018726706066174
- Schawbel, D. (2012). Millennials vs. baby boomers: Who would you rather hire? *Time*. Retrieved from <http://business.time.com/2012/03/29/millennials-vs-baby-boomers-who-would-you-rather-hire/>
- Sessa, V. I., Kabacoff, R. I., Deal, J., & Brown, H. (2007). Generational differences in leader values and leadership behaviors. *The Psychologist-Manager Journal*, 10, 47-74. doi:10.1080/10887150709336612
- Sheridan, A. (2004). Chronic presenteeism: The multiple dimensions to men's absence from part-time work. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 11, 207-225. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0432.2004.00229.x
- SHRM. (2008). *A history of human resources: SHRM's 60-year journey*. Alexandria, VA: Society for Human Resource Management.
- SHRM Research Quarterly. (2009). The multigenerational workforce: Opportunity for competitive success. Alexandria, VA: SHRM.
- Smithson, J., & Stokoe, E. H. (2005). Discourses of work-life balance: Negotiating 'genderblind' terms in organizations. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 12, 147-168. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0432.2005.00267.x
- Smola, K. W., & Sutton, C. D. (2002). Generational differences: Revisiting generational work values for the new millennium. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 23, 363-382. doi:10.1002/job.147
- Strauss, W., & Howe, N. (1991). *Generations: The history of America's future, 1584-2069*. New York, NY: William Morrow and Company.
- Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Twenge, J. M. (2010). A review of the empirical evidence on generational differences in work attitudes. *Journal of Business & Psychology*, 25, 201-210. doi:10.1007/s10869-010-9165-6
- Twenge, J. M., Campbell, S. M., Hoffman, B. J., & Lance, C. E. (2010). Generational differences in work values: Leisure and extrinsic values increasing, social and intrinsic values decreasing *Journal of Management*, 36, 1117-1142. doi:10.1177/0149206309352246
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2012). Table RDI-1. Household income before and after taxes: 1980 to 2003. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/measures/rdi1.html>
- Westerman, J. W., & Yamamura, J. H. (2007). Generational preferences for work environment fit: Effects on employee outcomes. *Career Development International*, 12, 150-161. doi:10.1108/13620430710733631
- Wong, M., Gardiner, E., Lang, W., & Coulon, L. (2008). Generational differences in personality and motivation: do they exist and what are the implications for the workplace? *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 23, 878-890. doi:10.1108/02683940810904376
- Zemke, R., Raines, C., & Filipczak, B. (2000). *Generations at work: Managing the clash of veterans, boomers, Xers, and nexters in your workplace*. New York, NY: Performance Research Associates.